

INTERVIEW

„Who among us gets to be global?“

An Interview with Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

DANA SCHMALZ — 18 May, 2016



Atossa Araxia Abrahamian wrote a book entitled „The Cosmopolites“, which speaks about global citizenship in a way that is deeply informed by the theoretical discussion but at the same time rich in concrete stories. These involve stories about stateless persons, for whom their state of residence decided to buy citizenship of another state, stories about the merchandising of passports for a global elite, and stories of a man who decided to no longer be citizen of any state. Herself holding passports of Canada, Switzerland, and Iran, Atossa says she feels the most citizen in the place where we met, New York.

In your book, one encounters cosmopolitanism not so much as an abstract ideal but as an umbrella term for the manifold experiences and desires of belonging in a globalized world. You begin by telling your own story of being “brought up with no a sense of motherland or fatherland, no pledges of allegiance, [...]”. Has cosmopolitanism today become something very concrete?

Let's say that there at least two different sides to cosmopolitanism. First of all, it has partly become something very corporate today. People who consider themselves cosmopolitans belong to a large extend to a global elite. In that sense, cosmopolitanism is less a spiritual condition than a class thing, in terms of who gets to be cosmopolitan. At the same time, it still has these idealistic connotations, which sometimes tend to be forgotten. When you live in a “cosmopolitan community”, you're probably surrounded by expats, people who move around a lot. And while they might be very aware about what's happening on the other side of the planet, they may not have the same sort of awareness about what's going on in their backyard. That was my experience when growing up in Geneva in a very international environment. It challenges the ancient Greek idea that belonging is a series of circles, first the family, then your town, the region you're living in, your country. I almost experienced this in reverse.

Looking at the sort of “corporate cosmopolitanism” as you put it: Large parts of your book deal with the sale of citizenship. The topic received a lot of attention recently, for instance in the case of Malta. But you explore and describe the issue not only with regard to a miniscule group of wealthy investors but as a much more diverse phenomenon. Foremost this includes the story of the

United Arab Emirates (UAE) buying citizenship of Comoro Islands for a part of their population without Emirati citizenship. How did you get to this story?

At the outset, I was writing about rich people buying passports but that seemed a bit limited from a journalist's point of view. I was wondering what bigger consequences there were to the issue. At that time, a friend from Dubai told me that the Emirati government was actually buying passports for the bidoon, stateless residents of the UAE. They were buying passports from the Comoro Islands, which are about 2700 miles away! I started to investigate, calling NGOs and the UN who confirmed that this was happening – which I thought was crazy. On Wikileaks I found diplomatic notes that seemed baffled by the whole idea, and then I started reading the papers from the Comoro Islands. They showed that there was a massive debate, and also that the whole project came about by one middleman, who – and that is an interesting narrative twist – belonged to the global elite that otherwise would be buying their own additional citizenships. To find out more, I travelled to the Comoro Islands. Getting to public records was difficult, so I would begin by speaking with persons on the streets. At some point, a rumor came about that I was a spy of CIA and people stopped talking to me but luckily that was only towards the end of my trip. So although it is hard to have official numbers confirmed, I was able to get together some information on the deal that was passed regarding the sale of Comorian citizenship.

On the basis of this and other stories, you reflect about what citizenship might have started to become in 21st century. But it also conveys a perspective on how limited the concept of national citizenship has always been: You

tell about a stateless man in Kuwait who says he never felt stateless but local. And you quote a Syrian man who states that he never really felt Syrian since he never lived in this country. Can we say that in that sense, your stories also offer a critique of the particularistic Western conception of citizenship?

We can certainly say that the Western 20th-century-idea of citizenship is limited and has always been limited. The Gulf countries, which are now buying citizenship for their stateless population, are states in which people never had this kind of Westphalian national identity, so it seems in a way natural that they would be the first ones to make use of these markets, employing citizenship as a form of power over marginalized communities. What citizenship might become in 21st century remains to be seen. There appears to be a dialectic: on the one hand, we have nationalists who are trying to close borders, striving back to an idea of a pure form of the nation state. On the other hand, we have globalization and the EU, which is a more inclusive vision yet at the same time heavily depends on free trade and certain liberal ideologies that can also be harmful.

So are we only shifting between versions of exclusion either based on cultural-ethnic or based on economic arguments? Is there anything like a utopia for political membership which is neither static-national nor...?

...entirely transactional? Yes, I think we are trying to figure out what that could be. It was interesting when the Scottish movement for independence started to get a lot of press. I was struck by how progressive their version of nationalism seemed: It was nationalism in that they wanted their own state but at the same time they were in favor of more

immigration and open welfare systems. It's a way of thinking about the nation not in ethnic terms. Ultimately, taxes are essential to all of this: The protectionist argument against globalization and open borders is the narrative of "the Chinese are taking jobs away, this is bad for our workers". But the problem largely lies in the fact that you allow large companies to engage in a race to the bottom. So, the question of distribution is one that really needs to be tackled in order to have countries that are based neither on an entirely transactional relationship between persons nor on ethnic-nationalist sentiments.

This perspective also comes up when you tell about Garry Davis, the man who renounced his US citizenship and declared himself citizen of the world. The idealism that getting rid of national belonging would be a solution is countered by the impression that new dominations will easily replace the old ones. But the gaps that appear between changing conceptions of membership offer important occasions for critique?

Probably, although it's hard to be optimistic right now. It seems that every time a bomb attack happens, right wing politicians take the cue and ruin it for everyone. Several European states have reintroduced borders, Poland most lately. If the Schengen system is abolished, that would be a huge step backwards. It's hard to make predictions, we will see what these next days and weeks will bring.

Speaking about the EU and the so-called refugee crisis: Given that asylum claims are decided more and more on the basis of nationality rather than a detailed individual assessment, the interest in the sale of passports on black

markets is probably rising. Does such sale of fake passport relate to the sale of citizenship?

What is interesting is that on formal market the “better” a citizenship is – meaning the more wealthy the state, the more places you can go to with the passport – the more expensive it will be. But for refugees, the “worse” a citizenship is, the more valuable fake papers are. If you take Syria – a country that is completely in shambles and you cannot really travel anywhere with a Syrian passport – the value of this passport will be higher, because states consider you to have a more legitimate need for protection than, say, persons from Iraq or Afghanistan. The other interesting thing is that for countries that legally sell their citizenship, there often emerges a parallel black market, which threatens to take down the legal market. There has been a case of persons from the Caribbean who showed up in Canada claiming that they were citizens of St. Kitts, but, as it turned out, on forged papers. That caused a diplomatic issue, and it made also the legal program look bad.

Closing with the central question you raise: „Who among us gets to be global?“ This seems to shift the focus from a search for adequate membership criteria towards noting the unequal distribution of entitlements to mobility. What does that mean for political alliances?

It is a very common experience that there exists a gap between the assignment of state citizenship and the feeling of belonging. Voting is something I think about a lot: I live in New York, I pay my taxes here, and it would be nice to vote. If countries and cities want people to feel part of the community, it would be a wise thing to allow voting based on residency and not solely based on citizenship. In some places

you have this, as a EU citizen living in another EU state, you can vote locally. Then there are other perplexities: Commonwealth citizens of Malta, Cyprus, and Gibraltar are going to be able to vote on the Brexit – which is particularly interesting given that Malta and Cyprus are two states that sell their citizenship. So you could end up with a scenario in which a Russian oligarch buys a Maltese passport and then has a say in whether the United Kingdom leaves the EU. It definitely challenges our thinking about what citizenship means and requires.

ISSN 2510-2567

Tags: *Citizenship, Globalization, Human Rights, International Legal Theory, Legitimacy*



Related

Knowledge Production in Comparative Constitutional Law 31 July, 2017 In "Global South in Comparative Constitutional Law"	Cross-border surrogacy transactions (CBST): 20 July, 2016 In "Discussion"	There is no point in waiting 15 July, 2015 In "Interview"
--	---	---

PREVIOUS POST



Die Besonderheit der Bodenschätze

NEXT POST

Europäischer Gerichtshof für Menschenrechte:
Türkei diskriminiert 20 Millionen Aleviten



No Comment

Leave a reply

Logged in as ajv2016. Log out?

SUBMIT COMMENT

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

☐ Notify me of new posts by email.